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ABSTRACT

College students' (N=40) stereotypes about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) were examined in light of their political ideology. Students were administered the Stereotypes About AIDS Scale and the AIDS Anxiety Scale (AAS). Students were also asked to label themselves as politically liberal or conservative. The hypothesis that politically conservative students would have more stereotyped attitudes about AIDS was supported. Conservative students displayed less accurate knowledge about the transmission of AIDS, had more homophobic stereotypes about AIDS, were more likely to demonstrate a "just world" attitude about AIDS, and were less likely to support public dissemination of information about AIDS. These results suggest that AIDS is a political issue and that politically-related attitudes about AIDS might affect public policy decisions regarding AIDS research, treatment, and education. Conservative and liberal students did not differ in regard to their responses on the AAS or in regard to reported sexual behavior.
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Stereotypes about AIDS as a Function of
Political Ideology

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Running head: STEREOTYPES AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

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Abstract

College students' ($N = 40$) stereotypes about AIDS were examined in light of their political ideology. Students were administered the Stereotypes About AIDS Scale (SAAS) and the AIDS Anxiety Scale (AAS). Students were also asked to label themselves as politically liberal or conservative. The hypothesis that politically conservative students would have more stereotyped attitudes about AIDS was supported. Conservative students (a) displayed less accurate knowledge about the transmission of AIDS, (b) had more homophobic stereotypes about AIDS, (c) were more likely to demonstrate a "just world" attitude about AIDS, and (d) were less likely to support public dissemination of information about AIDS. These results indicate (a) that AIDS is a political issue and (b) that politically related attitudes about AIDS might affect public policy decisions regarding AIDS research, treatment and education. Conservative and liberal students did not differ in regard to their responses on the AAS or in regard to reported sexual behavior.

Stereotypes about AIDS as a Function of Political Ideology

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a primary health concern in the United States in the 1990s. However, America also faces a sociopolitical crisis related to the AIDS virus, namely prejudice and discrimination against those diagnosed with the disease.

Some (e.g., Crimp & Rolston, 1990; Shilts, 1987) cite conservative and homophobic politics as a primary factor underlying a delay in governmental and medical response to the AIDS crisis. Research into the causes of AIDS and a search for an antibody for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) may have been slow to advance due to negligence and a lack of concern for the gay male population that was hit first, and hardest, by AIDS. The political ideology and prejudices of some governmental leaders may have created hesitancy to fund research for a "gay disease".

In addition to impeding funding for research and medical care, discrimination against people living with AIDS (PLWAs) has other negative ramifications. Due to ignorance about the transmission of AIDS, an unfounded hysteria developed in response to PLWAs, who found themselves the victims of overt discrimination. PLWAs are commonly fired from jobs, denied housing, refused public education, and, in some cases, denied medical, dental, and mental health services (e.g., Anderson, 1989; Crawford, Humfleet, Ribordy, Ho, & Vickers, 1991; Schietinger, 1988). Male PLWAs are commonly assumed to be

gay, resulting in dual discrimination. Further, social alienation, even from family members and friends, has been common (Anderson, 1989).

Moreover, stereotyping AIDS as a disease that affects "at risk" populations may increase risky sexual behavior among those who do not consider themselves at risk, including college students (Manning, Barenberg, Gallese, & Rice, 1989). College students are at greater risk than older cohorts for contracting AIDS; about two in every 1,000 college students are thought to be HIV+ (Carroll, 1991). Yet, although students are relatively well educated about the transmission and prevention of AIDS (Carney, Baroway, Perkins, Pousson, & Whipple, 1991; Carroll, 1991), many only sporadically use any protection against exposure to AIDS when having sex.

Carney et al. (1991) found that, overall, college students do not hold negative views about PLWAs. But, stereotypes about AIDS among college students, or others, has not been examined in light of political ideology. Yet, given that AIDS is a highly publicized and politicized issue, and one that has been linked, however erroneously, with sexual orientation, it follows that political ideology might be related to stereotypes about AIDS.

This study examines the relation between political ideology and stereotypes about AIDS. It was expected that those with more liberal political views would hold fewer stereotypes about AIDS and would display less anxiety about AIDS than the politically conservative.

Methods

Forty (21 females and 19 males) Appalachian State University psychology students participated in the study (M age = 20.35 years). The subjects were predominantly white (N = 39) and heterosexual (N = 39).

A questionnaire was used to gather basic demographic information and political ideology. Specifically, subjects were asked to classify themselves as either politically liberal (N = 25) or politically conservative (N = 14). One subject did not complete this information. In addition, information about sexual activity and use of safer sex practices was gathered.

The Stereotypes about AIDS Scale (SAAS; Snell, Finney & Godwin, 1991) and the AIDS Anxiety Scale (AAS; Snell, et al., 1991) were used to assess attitudes about AIDS. The SAAS is comprised of 15 subscales that measure stereotypic beliefs about AIDS (see Results). The six subscales of the AAS measure (a) physiological arousal, (b) fear, (c) sexual inhibition, (d) cognitive worry, (e) discussion inhibition and (f) anxiety in regard to AIDS. The SAAS and AAS have adequate reliability and validity (Snell, et al., 1991).

Procedure

After obtaining informed consent, subjects completed the SAAS, the AAS, and the demographic form. An experimental procedure (not described here) examining the impact of role models on attitudes about AIDS was also administered.

Results

SAAS and AAS

T-tests were used to examine differences between liberal and conservative students on each of the SAAS and AAS subscales. Conservative students were found to hold significantly more stereotypic beliefs about AIDS than liberal students (see Table 1 for means). Conservative students were significantly less likely than liberal students to (a) think that AIDS education is needed ($t [37] = 2.13, p < .05$) or (b) demonstrate an understanding of the transmission of AIDS ($t [37] = 2.74, p < .05$). Further, conservative students were more likely than liberal students to believe that (a) there should not be confidentiality for PLWAs ($t [37] = 2.67, p < .05$), (b) there is exaggerated media attention about AIDS ($t [37] = 3.35, p < .01$), (c) AIDS is a risk to medical personnel ($t [37] = 2.93, p < .01$), (d) homosexuality is the cause of AIDS ($t [37] = 2.23, p < .05$), and (e) AIDS is a moral punishment ($t [36] = 2.74, p < .01$). There was also a nonsignificant trend - conservative students were somewhat more likely to say that there is a cure for AIDS ($t [37] = 1.86, p = .073$). Liberal and conservative students did not differ in regard to beliefs that (a) PLWAs should be secluded, (b) AIDS is a concern for everyone, (c) AIDS should not be discussed, (d) everyone should be tested for AIDS, (e) condoms help prevent AIDS, (f) AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, and (g) AIDS can be transmitted via blood.

There were no significant differences between liberal and conservative students on the AAS.

Sexual Behavior

T-tests used to compare conservative and liberal students in regard to sexual activity and use of safer sex practices yielded no significant differences. However, most students ($N = 34$; 85%) reported some past or present sexual activity. Of those, 66% reported that they always practiced safer sex, 24% reported sometimes using safer sex techniques, and 10% reported never practicing safer sex. There were significant correlations between the Anxiety about AIDS Exposure subscale of the AAS and sexual activity ($r = .39$, $p < .01$) and safer sex practices ($r = .43$, $p < .01$). Students who were sexually active and/or who did not always use safer sex practices had higher levels of anxiety about possible exposure to AIDS. There were no other significant correlations between sexual behavior and the AAS or SAAS subscales.

Discussion

The first part of the hypothesis was supported, conservative students had significantly more stereotypic beliefs about AIDS than did liberal students. However, the second part of the hypothesis was not supported - there were no significant differences between conservative and liberal students on the subscales of the AAS.

The latter finding indicates that students, regardless of political ideology, have similar levels of anxiety about

AIDS. This is consistent with the findings that (a) students were equally likely to be sexually active regardless of political ideology and (b) a majority of sexually active students reported using safer sex techniques whenever they engage in sex. Indeed, as might be expected, students' reported sexual activity and use of safer sex practices were related to anxiety about AIDS exposure. It is encouraging to find that a majority of sexually active students report that they always use protection against AIDS during sex. However, it is possible that students' responses were affected by a social desirability bias. Additionally, students were not questioned specifically about safer sex practices during various forms of sexual activity. Therefore, their responses may have been based only on vaginal intercourse (for example) and may not have tapped into the use of safer sex practices during oral-genital sex or anal intercourse.

Conservative and liberal students differed on eight of the 15 SAAS subscales. In sum, the findings indicate that conservative and liberal students do not differ in regard to (a) **basic** knowledge about AIDS and safer sex or (b) attitudes about AIDS testing and isolating PLWAs. But, conservative students displayed (a) more homophobic stereotypes about AIDS, (b) had **less** accurate knowledge about the transmission of AIDS, (c) were more likely to demonstrate a "just world" attitude about AIDS, and (d) were less likely to support public dissemination of information about AIDS. These findings are consistent with research indicating that

homophobia is strongly related to attitudes about AIDS. Homophobic attitudes have been found to be the best predictor of attitudes about AIDS and PLWAs among a variety of populations, including students (Dupras, Levy, Samson, & Tessier, 1989), mental health professionals (Crawford, et al., 1991), and the general public (Stipp & Kerr, 1989). So, political ideology may be linked more directly to homophobia than attitudes toward AIDS per se.

While there is strong anecdotal evidence for an association between political attitudes and negative versus positive attitudes toward gays and lesbians in the U.S., there is little empirical evidence of this correlation. However, the 1992 National Republican and Democratic conventions, as well as anti-gay initiatives several states (including Colorado and Oregon), provide ample evidence that politically polarized attitudes exist toward gays and gay rights issues. In addition, Jenson, Gambles, and Olsen (1988) found that both political ideology and religious beliefs predicted levels of homophobia and acceptance of gays in several European countries. Thus, political ideology and related discrimination toward a particular class of people could lead to public policy decisions that affect not only gays and lesbians, but, as in the case of AIDS, could negatively impact on everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, race, or gender.

Our findings are also congruent with research that indicates that homophobic attitudes are related to knowledge

about AIDS transmission, i.e., conservative students were less knowledgeable in this area than liberal students. Stipp and Kerr (1989) suggest that anti-gay attitudes may foster inaccurate beliefs about AIDS transmission and may prevent accurate information about AIDS from being accepted by homophobic people. Thus, we must (a) address anti-gay attitudes along with providing AIDS education and (b) more directly explore the possibility that anti-gay attitudes affect the attitudes and behavior of the general public and political leaders (Dupras, et al., 1991; Stipp & Kerr, 1989).

Finally, we need to more directly examine political ideology and its links to homophobia. The relation between religious beliefs, political attitudes and homophobia/prejudice against gays also requires further study. These areas are important for further research not only because such attitudes affect public policy about AIDS research, treatment and education, but also because of the impact of discrimination and injustice on the individual.

There are a few limitations to the study that should be addressed. First, a relatively small number of subjects participated in the study. However, the findings were robust, even with this small sample. Secondly, the participants were all college students and were predominantly white, heterosexual, and middle class. Although the sample was fairly representative of the University community, the use of such a homogeneous group limits the external validity of the findings, which may not generalize to other age or

cohort groups, gay men and lesbians, and/or populations with greater racial diversity. Finally, this data was gathered during a pre-election year and the issues of AIDS and gay rights were both salient campaign issues. Thus, public opinion on these issues may have become increasingly polarized and this may have impacted on the results.

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